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## DHS is seeking more than 600 migrants for possible ties to Venezuelan gang

So far 100 have been identified as gang members. The rest remain under investigation and could later be found to be victims, witnesses or members of the gang.

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Oct. 23, 2024, 10:30 AM UTC

By Julia Ainsley

The Department of Homeland Security has identified more than 600 migrants in the U.S. who may have connections to a notorious Venezuelan gang that is drawing growing concern from local and federal law enforcement officials, according to data obtained exclusively by NBC News.

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Roughly 100 of the 600 migrants DHS has deemed “subjects of interest” were confirmed members of the gang whom the department recommended be placed on an FBI watchlist, officials said. The others could be found after a review to be victims, witnesses or members of the gang.

The Venezuelan gang, known as Tren de Aragua, or TDA, has a known presence in 15 states and a possible presence in eight others, according to the data.

Homeland Security officials began working to compile the data on TDA this spring after they saw a spike in crime by gang members in New York and other cities across the U.S. Crimes tied to the gang include sex trafficking in Louisiana and the point-blank shooting of two New York City police officers.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has arrested more than 100 people suspected of being associated with TDA in connection with crimes since October 2022, the data said, and 75 have been arrested for immigration violations. More than 20 have been referred for federal prosecution.

“DHS has an ongoing operation to crack down on gang members through re-screening certain individuals previously encountered, in addition to the rigorous screening and vetting at the border,” a DHS spokesperson said. “All individuals confirmed or suspected to be gang members are referred for criminal prosecution or detained and placed into expedited removal.”

Determining the exact number of TDA members who have crossed into the U.S. is an enormous challenge, because, unlike most countries, Venezuela does not share its criminal histories or other information with U.S. officials. That also makes it difficult for border agents to identify who among the Venezuelans crossing the border might be TDA members.

Law enforcement experts say the figure of 600 illustrates the gap in intelligence about the gang’s presence in the U.S. due to the lack of information provided by the Venezuelan government.

“The number is almost disturbingly low,” said Frank Figliuzzi, a former FBI assistant director for counterintelligence and an NBC News contributor. “It should be higher.”

But Figliuzzi said TDA has not yet reached the size or sophistication levels of larger gangs that have existed in the U.S. for years.

“Most gang experts would say that TDA is not yet exhibiting signs of sophistication and advanced organization within the United States,” he said.

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MS-13, which [emerged in Los Angeles](#) but grew into a transnational gang based in El Salvador, has [roughly 10,000 members](#) in the U.S., according to the Justice Department.

The 18th Street gang, also from Central America, once had an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 members, according to the Justice Department, though its numbers have weakened after a nationwide crackdown in El Salvador.



Peruvian police transfer a member of the Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua in Lima on Oct. 5, 2023. Cris Bouroncle / AFP via Getty Images file

## A 2024 campaign issue

The exact size of TDA in the U.S. has become an issue in the presidential campaign.

Former President Donald Trump has claimed that TDA members have "[invaded and conquered](#)" Aurora, Colorado, a Denver suburb that is the state's third-largest city.

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But Aurora's police chief and its mayor, Mike Coffman, a Republican, [told NBC News last month](#) that Trump's claims about the gang are grossly exaggerated.

But Aurora's police chief and its mayor, Mike Coffman, a Republican, told NBC News last month that Trump's claims about the gang are grossly exaggerated.

Coffman said TDA members have not taken over the city of 400,000 people. Instead, several apartment buildings neglected by their landlord for years have a crime problem.

"The problems with the landlord really go back prior to the migrant crisis," Coffman said.

And while Trump has highlighted crimes TDA members have committed against Americans, a DHS official said the vast majority of TDA victims are Venezuelan migrants.

"They prey first and foremost on Venezuelans," the official said, noting that many of the recently arrived migrants had to pay TDA to come to the U.S. "We know that they control human smuggling routes out of Venezuela and into Colombia and into Panama. And they are controlling more of these passages as individuals move north through Mexico."

More than 20 of the more than 140 investigations ICE launched into TDA since October 2022 involve suspected human smuggling or trafficking, according to the data. And the majority are investigations based on suspected gang affiliation.

Ammon Blair, a former Border Patrol agent who now advocates for stronger security at the border as a senior fellow at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, said the 600 figure tells him that DHS does not know the full number of TDA members actually inside the U.S.

Blair said that when he retired from the Border Patrol in November, the agency was not scrutinizing migrants crossing the border heavily enough.

"When you look at the process, unfortunately, they're just steamrolled through," he said. "The Border Patrol has created a conveyor belt, an automated system to process them and release them as fast as possible into the United States. We were not asking questions."

The data obtained by NBC News showed that fewer than 30 of the more than 600 subjects of interest regarding TDA are in ICE custody.

A DHS official said many of the 600 people have not been detained by ICE because they are in the custody of other law enforcement organizations. The officials said that ICE may also not know where they are or that their connections to TDA or crimes may not be confirmed or that arresting them might interfere with ongoing criminal investigations.

Venezuelan nationals can be released from custody if they have served their time for committing crimes. But because Venezuela



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 CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS.

Venezuelan nationals can be released from custody if they have served their time for committing crimes. But because Venezuela refuses to take back nationals who have emigrated to the U.S., ICE has to release them because of a federal court ruling that bars it from detaining migrants indefinitely.

If a migrant in ICE custody is deemed to be a true risk to public safety, a separate DHS official said, ICE will find a way to keep the person detained, even if it is by another law enforcement organization. 



Julia Ainsley

Julia Ainsley is the homeland security correspondent for NBC News and covers the Department of Homeland Security for the NBC News Investigative Unit.



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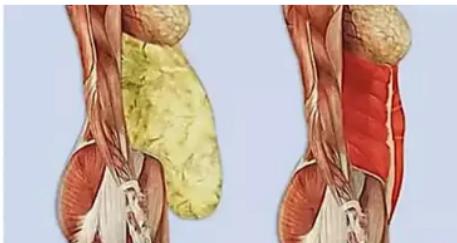


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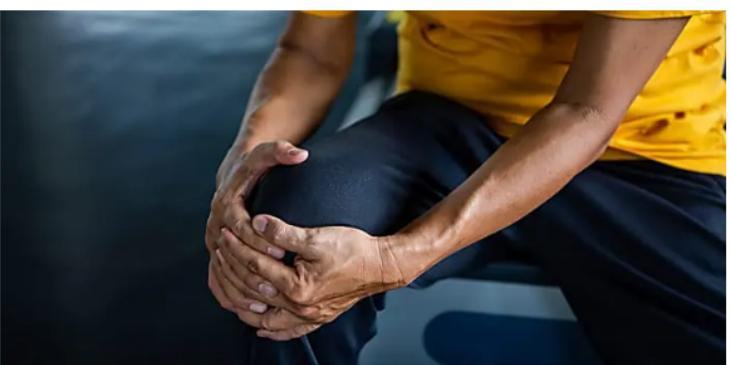
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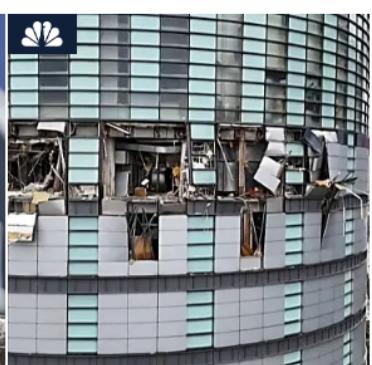
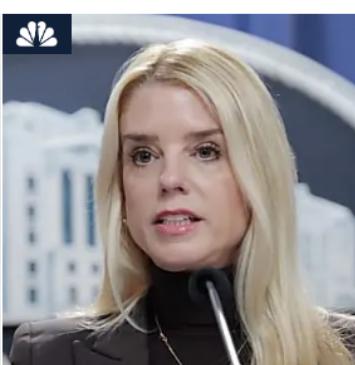
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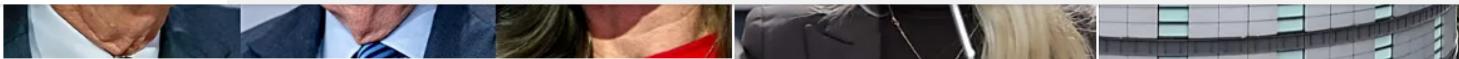
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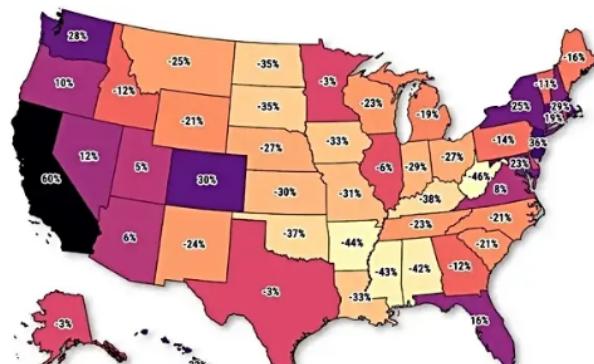


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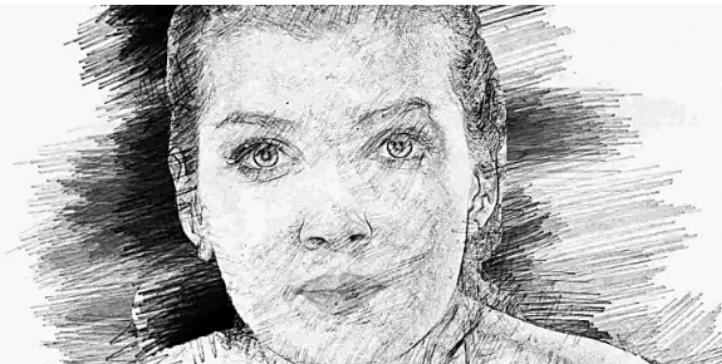
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